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Sue Norton

Technological University Dublin, susan.norton@tudublin.ie

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Writing and Well-Being: Story as Salve in the Work of (More than) Two Updikes

SUE NORTON

John Updike's "Separating," first published in the *New Yorker* in 1975, is a short story—a work of fiction—widely known to be based on fact. In it, Richard and Joan Maple are faced with the dilemma of how to tell their four children that they are planning a marital separation. Though the couple formulates a strategy for this disclosure, Richard's tears during a lobster dinner with Joan and three of their four children reveal their secret prematurely. By the end of the story, the family, as well as the reader, is left feeling the emotionally raw effects of what has just happened and what is coming. Given that, as James Schiff writes, "the four Maple children are the same age and gender as the four Updike children, and the fictional family resides on a piece of property resembling the former Updike family home in Ipswich," and that a *New Yorker* galley of the story shows notations in Mary Updike's handwriting questioning how one of their children will react to a particular line in the story, "Separating" feels as real and true as does, potentially, any Updike story (Schiff 122).

David Updike's "Summer 1974, in Fiction and Memory," a seventeen-page essay published in the *John Updike Review* in 2017, is nonfiction. It recalls events from the same evening as depicted in his father's story, i.e., the night when his parents announced their separation. However, it is told from his own perspective as the eldest son, the child who was not at the family dinner, and it reflects on the imaginative embellishments of his father's story. While informing the reader of moments in

"Separating" where fact and fiction diverge, "Summer 1974" narrates the sequence of events that led to his parents' decision. Like a story, it is also attentive to point of view, irony, and several other earmarks of fiction including intertextuality; thus, we might classify the essay as literary nonfiction in that it strives to please the reader with its own flourishes, not just offer exposition on a subject.

David, for instance, begins the essay by establishing setting: "It was a beautiful day in June 1974, clear and windless with the chill of late spring still in the air, held against the coming warmth of summer" (5). This opening incidentally mirrors the beginning of "Separating," in which we are told: "The day was fair. Brilliant. All that June the weather had mocked the Maples' internal misery with solid sunlight" (177). Having so established a calm before the storm, deploying pathetic fallacy as might a fiction writer, David proceeds to walk the reader through his movements as a seventeen-year-old on summer vacation on the day in question. He girl-watched, took a train to a jazz concert in Boston with his friends, wandered around head shops and tie-dye stores, and fell into an inexplicably dark mood. When unexpectedly met by his father at the station late at night, he was concerned. At this point in his essay, David offers a lengthy extract from his father's story, in which the character of the son, Dickie, is told by his father, Richard, "Your mother and I have decided to separate" (7). David does not, at this point in his essay, dispute the fictionalized version of how the father in "Separating" informs his son of the impending split living arrangements; "Nothing legal, no divorce yet," Richard tells Dickie. But in subsequent paragraphs, David explains that his father, in selecting details for his short story, left out much of what transpired between them in real life, especially while driving home: "things that came out in a blur of openness, of confession—something about how, during the course of their marriage, they both had had relationships, 'affairs,' but they had always been able to get past them, or through them, and back to their marriage, at least until now" (11). He also informs us that his father told him he had "fallen 'in love'" with the woman who had moved into the house they have moved out of, which, David tells us, is "a curious detail, also not in the story." David's disclosure reveals that Updike's biographer, Adam Begley, was incorrect when he claimed in *Updike* that "for the first fifteen months of the separation" John's "affair with Martha was still a secret" from his children and mother (372).

As David continues his essay, the reader is made aware of various points of departure between real life during the summer of 1974 and what happens in "Separating." These points of departure are not so much "corrections" to the circumstances as presented in his father's story, but elaborations on details that were left

out, such as how David was startled by his father's phrase "in love." He also tells us about his own escapades in love that summer, most memorably with "a pretty Greek American girl" two years his junior, and how "in a small act of rebellion" he quit his low-paying beach job and took up house painting with one of his friends (11, 13). They named their shared crop of marijuana "Republic Gold" after their ugliest shade of yellow paint (13). Soon, he returned to prep school, leaving his mother and two younger siblings to "fend for themselves." He understood that it would be they who would bear the "emotional brunt" of his father's departure.

Though focused on diverse aspects of the Updike marital separation, both story and essay make liberal use of what the writer and critic Barrie Jean Borich refers to as *actuality* in such a way that "the actual" functions as character. People who really lived (what she calls, "bona fides lives"), occurrences that really happened ("factual events"), and places that really exist ("mappable locations")—these elements inform the work of writers of fiction and nonfiction alike (3). They serve as fact-based referents, whereby "the actual is as much character as subject" (1). As regards nonfiction, she elaborates:

Whether a nonfiction work is made of literal facts or the more diffuse shades of impression, emotion, and interpretation will depend on the subject and the artist's approach to the subject, as long as something of the referent itself retains presence and integrity within the work. Fiction and poetry may too possess an actual referent, but are not dependent upon that referent. (5)

She regards the mission of the nonfiction writer as, specifically, one of artistic render, so that what unfolds on the page can be classified as "literature of witness," as is the case with David Updike's "Summer 1974" (1). Not only has he borne witness to the events surrounding his parents' separation, but he accepts the task of the nonfiction writer, which Borich outlines thusly:

Our job as nonfiction writers seeking to artistically represent and explicate the feel of our own experience, as well as that of the times in which we live, is not to fabricate plots and situations, but rather to select from the breadth of memory, research, and observation already set out for sale. Creative selection, more so than invention, is the province of creative nonfiction. (2)

But crucially, she adds, "the line between the prose genres [fiction and nonfiction] cannot be merely that of so called 'truth,'" nor of the bearing of witness (3). "All literature is about some aspect of human life," Borich writes, "and seeks to reveal the truth of human living." In such a light, both John Updike's "Separating" and David

Updike's "Summer 1974" pursue the revelation of truth, each shedding light in its own distinct ways on the pain of marital dissolution and its familial consequences. The short story offers verisimilitude: it feels like life, appears real, but it alters facts as its author sees fit. The essay, by contrast, alleges facts but is most interested in qualifying them, interpreting them, and, as I will conclude, offering compassion to the reader as a way forward in this—neatly phrased by Borich—"human living."

Both John Updike's "Separating" and David Updike's "Summer 1974" share the same referent: the painful separation of John and Mary Updike in 1974. In each text, we discern writers attempting to make sense of this single traumatic experience in order to achieve understanding through their acts of narration and composition. But regardless of genre, whether fiction or nonfiction, these two works, which exist symbiotically (David's essay depends for its existence on his father's short story), offer more than the navigation of trauma. Along with the work of one more Updike, to whom I will soon refer, they establish a convincing causality between writing well and being well.

This causality is deftly encapsulated by a simple and indisputable assertion that appears on the inside jacket of the aforementioned Begley biography, *Updike* (2014). It says that John Updike was "a private person compelled to spill his secrets on the printed page" (Begley). It is this word "compelled" that interests me because it goes directly to the soothing potential of writing. John Updike regularly divested himself of personal "secrets" in his work—usually fictively but sometimes in his essays too. And for many writers, what is writing if not a compulsion? David Foster Wallace famously came to a similar conclusion in his 1997 review of Updike's *Toward the End of Time*, writing that the author, whom he had long admired, was radically self-absorbed and, as he memorably declared, one of American literature's Great Male Narcissists. Wallace did not object to self-absorption in a writer, Updike or any other. He was simply observing that many younger readers of Updike's work, often female readers, *had* begun to object to the uncritical self-absorption of his central characters, who allegedly resembled Updike himself.

In a July 2019 article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, journalist Claire Lowdon also defends Updike's right to be self-absorbed, along with our right as readers to be uncritical of writerly self-absorption. In her view, Updike's major gift to his readers was "the courage to draw directly from life," and she asks rhetorically, "Is self-absorbed fiction always narcissistic, or only if it's written by a straight white male?" implying that the excavation of personal experience is tolerated better by literary critics and reviewers when the writer in question is more marginal, less mainstream, maybe female or ethnic, or possibly less middle class.

Like Wallace and Lowdon, I also wish to ask whether as readers and critics of literary works, it is incumbent upon us to deem self-absorption—or perceived self-absorption—a negative aspect of writing. If John Updike felt compelled to spill his personal secrets in his stories, must we deem them somehow less worthy than more patently fictional literary works such as Ursula LeGuin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" or Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," both of which depict scenes that seemingly have little direct correspondence with the lives of the writers? Surely it would be unfair to regard all writing about the self as "self-absorbed," with the egotistical and therefore negative connotations of that phrase. Writing is quite different from, say, medical experimentation or suburban landscaping, two activities where self-absorption will likely yield disappointing results. Doctor Frankenstein comes to mind, as does Edward Scissorhands. But for the writer, self-absorption, or—if we must—narcissism, can open up channels of creativity that both comfort the writer and please the reader.

In this light, a story's reliance on truth or actuality should not be held against it or be perceived as some sort of cheat sheet or crutch. In her work on nonfiction and consequence, Borich has argued that the purpose and intention of a genre defines that genre. Similarly, John Updike once urged book reviewers to "try to understand what the author wished to do, and [not] blame him for not achieving what he did not attempt" (*Picked-Up Pieces* xviii). Borich believes, and I think most devoted readers of literature would agree, that fiction writers write "the truth" in that they make things up so as to render more effectively the emotional realness that might be obscured by mere facts. Consider the passage in "Separating" when the father looks up at the lit windows of his mistress's house as he passes the church with his older son in the car. David Updike tells us in his essay that this could not have happened because her house was on a different route "perhaps a quarter mile away" (10). Nevertheless, in the story John Updike offers a very close fictive approximation of the events the night that he and his first wife, Mary, informed their four teenage children that they would be splitting up, effective immediately, in Ipswich Massachusetts, church and all, after twenty years of marriage. "Separating" is deeply relatable and rather heart-breaking to move through.

For readers who have experienced separation, the story is probably cathartic, as it very likely was for John Updike to write it. We might go so far as to speculate that catharsis was its very fuel, the emotional energy that generated such sympathetic portraiture, as when the exiting husband, Richard Maple, "had become obsessed with battening down the house against his absence, replacing screens and sash cords, hinges and latches—a Houdini making things snug before his escape"

("Separating" 179). I've heard my college students draw in their breath at that passage. And, indeed, David Updike remembers how after his father left the home, he would "drift back" and resume some household project, shingle the barn, or build a chicken coop for his sister (11). David believes that his father was "tormented by confusion and guilt and the curious fact that he no longer lived with us."

Reading both story and essay, I come to the conclusion that in writing "Sepa-rating" John Updike sought to build compassion not only in himself and for himself but also in others close to him. Whether he did so successfully, and to what extent, can be known only by those closest to him. However, we do not just have these two versions of the event to rely on: there is a third. In "Summer 1974" David reminds us that his grandmother, Linda Grace Hoyer, was also a fiction writer and that her short story "Unlike Girls" is circuitously about the very same event, i.e., the separation of John and Mary Updike. (These stories and the essay are like Russian nesting dolls, one inside the other, inside the other.) In Linda's story, the middle-aged son, Christopher, visits his elderly mother, Ada—just as John visited Linda—and tells her elliptically that he is ending his marriage because "Girls are not like boys" and "[t]here are ways of getting a man to leave" (34). Ada, who has been seen to extend compassion repeatedly to neighbors and townsfolk throughout the narrative, is saddened. She probes Christopher as to why he is abandoning his children, telling him that she herself never left her own marriage. But all he can offer is "the time has come when I must do something for the boy I used to be." She asks, "And what can I do for him? He was such a good boy," to which Christopher answers, "Just love us all" (34).

David concludes his essay with those words, "Just love us all," a direct quotation from his grandmother's story. The immediate effect on the reader is one of compassion for his father, who, in his fictive imagining of himself (and also in his mother's fictive imagining of him) sought that compassion. The rendering of the departing husband and father in all of the texts in question does not shy away from the accusation of abandonment but also tempers that accusation with the greater priority of sympathetic comprehension.

David's essay offers comfort, as does his father's story, his grandmother's story, and David's own 2009 semiautobiographical story, "In the Age of Convertibles," which also takes as referent his parents' separation. Here, we find a number of gentle and compassionate exchanges between the father and son characters, each of whom feels self-recrimination for a car accident that neither has caused, yet for which both are willing to assume responsibility. The son, Pete, informs the police and his parents that he was behind the wheel when the Mustang crashed in the

woods, when in fact it was his underage girlfriend, for whom he wishes to spare any blame. He tries to console her “in the shadow of an enormous Maple tree” (36), yet another allusion to “Separating.” His father, who owns the convertible, is so guilt ridden by his recent exit from the household that he dissolves into “something of a state, pacing around and blaming himself for trusting his kids so much with the cars. In the web of his ramblings, he sounded like he was blaming his own marital troubles for the crash.” All of these representations of the eventual and now historic Updike divorce—as viewed in “Separating,” David’s essay, Linda’s story, and David’s story—appear to have been composed to understand crisis, while gesturing toward the alleviation of suffering, if only because each one minimizes accusation in favour of understanding.

In “Toward a Theory of Literary Nonfiction,” Eric Heyne identifies two different kinds of truth: accuracy and meaning. Accuracy relates to facts that can be corroborated among individuals; meaning is “much more nebulous” (486). In Heyne’s view, as in Borich’s, both fiction and nonfiction can deliver truthful meanings, however nebulous, i.e., meanings that can be agreed upon or corroborated. This sort of corroboration of truth, both fictive and nonfictive corroboration, occurs in each of these four Updike texts. Biographical facts and elements of plot may vary. Names are altered to suit purpose: Richard, Christopher, my father. Mistresses are, or are not, implicated to accommodate narrative priorities and, most likely, to protect loved ones. Streets maps are redrawn in the service of symbolism—a lit window not far from a church. Yet all of these texts corroborate meaning: they offer a kind of palliative care to a dying organism, a marriage of more than twenty years duration. They extend sympathy and understanding. They thematically foreground compassion.

But, of course, this element of compassion does not *a priori* make them good. Literary value is, like truth, also challenging to corroborate, and, as Heyne succinctly argues, though many have tried to describe it, establish it, put parameters around it, literary value has no empirical definition. It will always depend upon taste and trends. Nevertheless we—readers, people—are all “students of human constructions shaped by human purposes,” and “we need not be afraid to talk about truth” (Heyne 489). In other words, texts of all genres strive for shared understanding. Texts serve multiple functions in society. “[W]e will continue to look for authors,” Heyne writes, “who can find striking, enduring patterns for that unwashed mass of facts,” and there are few better collective examples of this than in the intertextual writings of John Updike, his son David, and his mother Linda.

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